

President Bush is a threat to bi-partisan CHIP bill

By Mary Caferro and Olivia Riutta - 07/15/07 – Helena Independent Record

While Senator Baucus is championing children's health through the reauthorization of CHIP, President Bush is failing America's children through his recent threat to veto the bi-partisan bill.

The Children's Health Insurance Program provides insurance for thousands of America's children, including over 13,000 in Montana. If our 37,000 uninsured kids lined up they would stretch 28 miles, from East Helena to Townsend, fill 673 school busses and form 4,111 little league teams. President Bush also went on to advise uninsured Americans to simply go to the emergency room, "I mean, people have access to health care in America. After all, you just go to an emergency room," (Cleveland, Ohio, July 10, 2007). President Bush's comments demonstrate this administration's clear lack of understanding of the health care crisis gripping our nation. In fact, his advice is the most inefficient and ineffective use of our health care dollars.

We have a health care crisis in this country with over nine million uninsured children and over 37 million uninsured adults. Our uninsured rates are rising because of the increasing cost of health insurance premiums. Premiums have increased much more quickly than the rate of inflation or real wages. Between 2003 and 2006, the average monthly premiums for single coverage in Montana increased by 24 percent, with the employee's share increasing by 77 percent. In Montana, where over 35 percent of our businesses have 10 or fewer employees, employers are forced to cost shift to employees. As the employee's share of premiums rise, many are forced to drop coverage.

Our uninsured rate among children in Montana is alarmingly high at over 16 percent and rising, while the national average remains steady at 12 percent. We have the fifth highest children's uninsured rate in the nation. Over 92 percent of these children come from a family where at least one parent is working. Uninsured children come from working families who are playing by the rules of a failed system.

People don't have access to health care in America and you can't "just go to an emergency room." Emergency rooms were designed as a place to go when people suffered a health care emergency, not as a last resort after months of delayed medical care. It is a lot cheaper to care for a cavity than for a root canal. It is cheaper in terms of health care dollars and invaluable to the individual who has had to suffer. Between 1993-2003, visits to ERs grew by 26 percent while 425 hospital emergency departments closed. Today, over 91 percent of ERs are overcrowded. Once every minute an ambulance is diverted to an alternative hospital because of ER overcrowding.

Primary and preventative care is the most cost effective use of our health care dollars but the Emergency Room is the only medical service that all Americans have a legal right to access. Our health care spending illustrates this: in the U.S. we spend twice that of Sweden, but we have lower life expectancy, and much higher infant and maternal mortality rates. In the U.S. we spend over 16 percent of our Gross Domestic Product on health care and that amount is increasing.

The problem is that we are not efficient in our health care spending and far too much is wasted. We need a health care system that saves money by keeping people healthy instead of denying them care. All Americans need access to quality and affordable health care so they can see a primary care physician before their medical needs become an emergency. We need to start by investing in the reauthorization of CHIP to cover more children, streamline outreach, and reduce barriers to enrollment. We need to support Senator Baucus in his role as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee in making access to health care for kids our number one priority.

U.S. taxpayers believe that President Bush must be healthy in order to make the best decisions for this nation, so we pay for his health insurance today and will for the rest of his life. It is unfortunate that the President doesn't value the health of over 46 million uninsured Americans who live at the mercy of a failed health care system.

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